



RAAF
HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Wau, New Guinea: The forgotten airlift

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History and Heritage – Air Force (HH-AF)
February 2025

Allied guerrilla operations against Japanese forces in the Bulolo Valley of Papua New Guinea from May 1942, culminating in the Battle of Wau in January 1943, were as important to Allied victory in the Southwest Pacific as the better-known battles of Milne Bay and Kokoda. At Wau, air support – particularly airlift – was critical to the Allied success. Without vital airlift, the effective defence of Wau would not have been possible.



Credit: Department of Defence

Following Japanese landings at Lae and Salamaua on the north coast of New Guinea in March 1942, members of the New Guinea Volunteer Rifles (NGVR) retreated into the mountains where they conducted guerrilla operations from a base at Wau. Their only form of resupply was native carriers who brought loads through the rugged Owen Stanley Mountains from the south coast. As

this trickle of supplies could barely support the small guerrilla force, no major Allied land operation was possible without a major upgrade to the surface supply line or a major airlift operation.

In order to increase the pressure on the Japanese forces around Lae and Salamaua, more troops and supplies needed to be flown in. Wau was the only secure airfield. On 22 May, the airlift of the Australian 2/5th Independent Company from Port Moresby commenced. DC-3/C-47 aircraft flown by United States Army Air Forces (USAAF) crews flew 20 sorties to Wau over four days, moving 305 troops and their equipment. American P-39 Airacobra fighters escorted the transport aircraft to protect them from attacks by Lae-based Zero fighters. Weather in the Wau area was unpredictable at best, and caused many missions to be aborted.

The 2/5th Independent Company, combined with the NGVR to form Kanga Force, conducted many successful raids against the enemy garrison at Lae–Salamaua during the next four months. Kanga Force was resupplied principally by air, both by landings at Wau airfield and airdropping to force elements deployed at various locations in the Mubo area. The Japanese continued to build up forces at Lae–Salamaua, moving 900 troops into Mubo within easy striking distance of Wau and Bulolo. In October, the 290-man

2/7th Independent Company was airlifted from Port Moresby to Wau to strengthen Kanga Force, which intensified its raids on Japanese units.

On 10 January 1943, a Japanese naval force unloaded hundreds of troops and tonnes of supplies at Lae, despite ongoing Allied air attacks. General Sir Thomas Blamey, Commander of Allied Land Forces, was concerned that the enemy intended to take Wau, and withdrew 17th Brigade from Milne Bay to Port Moresby in preparation for transferring it to Wau. The airlift of this 2000-strong brigade into Wau began on 14 January but was limited by the availability of transport aircraft. Around 10 C-47 sorties per day was the maximum that the USAAF troop carrier squadrons could provide. Again, the tropical weather reduced or stopped the airlift for days at a time. By 23 January, the number of aircraft available to the Wau airlift increased markedly. Allied forces had succeeded in capturing the Buna-Gona area, reducing the need for airlift support to that operation, and another USAAF Troop Carrier Group with 52 C-47s had arrived at Port Moresby. From this point on, at least 30 airlift sorties per day were flown into Wau, weather permitting. USAAF P-39 fighter patrols again provided protection from enemy fighters.

The Japanese, meanwhile, had renewed their advance towards Wau. By 28 January, the Australian force had consolidated its defensive positions around Wau airfield. If the airfield was lost, resupply on a sufficient scale would be impossible and the Allied force would be in a very vulnerable position. On 29 January, the weather cooperated, enabling the last 814 troops of 17th Brigade to be flown in during a record 60 sorties. On 30 January, guns and gunners of the Australian 2/1st Field Regiment were delivered by air to Wau. Within two hours of being unloaded

from the aircraft, these guns were providing artillery support to Australian ground forces. Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) Beaufighter aircraft of No 30 Squadron, based in Port Moresby, provided close air support to the troops, while Wirraway aircraft of No 4 Squadron (4SQN), operating from Wau airfield, provided reconnaissance and artillery spotting for the ground units.ⁱ



*The arrival of 25-pounder guns on 30 January 1943.
Credit: Department of Defence*

On the morning of 30 January, the Japanese began their major attack against Wau, advancing to within a few kilometres of the perimeter held by 17th Brigade. Despite some small arms rounds striking targets on the airfield, the defences held and the airfield remained usable. On 3 February, the Commander of 17th Brigade was able to report that Wau airfield was now secure and enemy forces were being pushed back. Unable to take Wau from the ground, the Japanese began air attacks on 6 February with nine bombers escorted by about 20 single-engine fighters. One USAAF C-47 transport was shot down by Zeros, but the enemy lost four bombers and 17 fighters to American fighters and Australian anti-aircraft batteries.

The Allied forces continued the airlift of troops and supplies, with army engineer companies repairing and upgrading Wau and Bulolo airfields. No 306 Radar Station, RAAF, and the 156th Light Anti-Aircraft Battery of the Royal Australian Artillery were airlifted to

Wau to augment the USAAF fighters in providing protection against Japanese air attack. The destruction of the Japanese reinforcements by Allied air attacks in the Battle of the Bismarck Sea in March 1943 ensured that the enemy never again had the strength to conduct offensive operations in the Lae–Salamaua area. The Australian 15th and 29th Brigades and the American 162nd Regiment joined the 17th Brigade in hounding the Japanese all the way to the coast. Due to the difficult terrain, much of the resupply of these units was by airdrop. The enemy retreated to Salamaua which finally fell to the Allied forces on 11 September 1943.

During a 19-day period, the Wau airlift had moved approximately 2763 troops and 817 tonnes of supplies into Wau. During the busiest four days of the battle (29 January–1 February), 247 sorties were flown into the airfield. Coordination of the overall airlift while the aircraft were airborne was the responsibility of No 4 RAAF Fighter Sector at Port Moresby. At its peak, the airlift involved three formations each of 18 transports, with each formation protected by up to 50 fighters. As Wau airfield had only limited parking space, sequencing the aircraft to land was a vital function. On top of all this, weather often prevented aircraft from reaching Wau, even on some occasions requiring a whole

formation of aircraft to return to Port Moresby.

The Battle for Wau was fought in an area that was extremely difficult to resupply by surface means. Thus, the success of the Allied ground force was dependent on airlift which, in turn, depended on maintaining control of the air and effectively securing the airfield. This battle was an excellent example of a successful joint and combined operation. The rapid reassignment of airlift assets from supporting operations in the Buna-Gona area, to airlifting forces into Wau, shows the inherent flexibility of air power and the need to have the tasking of the airlift force prioritised at a strategic level.

- *Allied victory at Wau entailed a major joint and combined operation*
- *Rugged, jungle-covered topography made large-scale surface resupply impossible and made air power critical to success*
- *This battle was an outstanding example of cooperation and coordination between Allied ground and air forces' well-orchestrated tactical actions*

This article was originally published in Pathfinder #70, July 2007

ⁱ In a barge sweep along the coast from Salamaua on 23 January, Ron Downing and Danny Box in A19-53 attacked five difficult-to-see and well-camouflaged barges but couldn't call the other Beaufighters in to finish the job because of a radio failure. A week later, Ron Downing and Danny Box were involved in a more dramatic incident while attacking Japanese ground forces attempting to capture Wau. An Australian Army unit had marked the target area with smoke bombs and Downing's attack with his 20mm incendiaries blew up a large ammunition dump, throwing up a huge amount of debris in his path. In consequence, A19-53 came home with one large hole and 58 smaller ones in the starboard mainplane and many more in the fuselage.

Three Beaufighters went to Wau on 3 February where the Army fired three smoke bombs into the target area, and a Wirraway from No 4 Squadron fired tracer bullets to indicate the target to be attacked. Three Beaufighters went out on a similar mission on 20 February but the Wirraway did not put in an appearance. The Army unit contacted the formation leader by radio and told him that as the attack on the primary target was impractical, he should proceed to the secondary target. However, the leaders (Ross Little and Alec Spooner in A19-8) found that they couldn't fly along the valley leading to that target because of low cloud so the formation returned to Wau.